

So what was it really like...?

(incorporating the tale of the delayed suitcases)

By Diocesan Communications Officer Karen Bushby

Having just about exhausted the topic of what life is like for Southern Sudanese people living in Yei, the time has come to address the frequently asked question **‘What was it like for you?’**

So in this section I cannot claim to speak for my colleagues Archdeacon Stephen Forde and accountant David Cromie, I can only really speak for myself. (That’s me, right, taking a photo).



I really enjoyed the trip to Africa. I found Yei to be a wonderful place full of wonderful people. Those we met in the diocese, in the street, and out in Mongo were friendly and obliging when it came to invading their space and taking photographs. (The family, right, allowed us to look inside their tukuls). What was a little disconcerting was that they did treat us like very important people. For example I was given a seat right at the front of Zamba Church, even though I had said I just wanted to ‘hang out’ and take photos. And one young woman actually bowed when I went to shake her hand. How must it feel to be the Queen!

That said, women are definitely second class citizens in this society, and while I was never treated with anything but respect by the men, the more enthusiastic handshakes and more intense conversations were definitely saved for my male colleagues. The women seemed to be the ones doing most of the work, getting water, sweeping up, cooking, washing dishes and, very obviously, minding the children. I only saw a man carrying a baby once in the whole week in Yei. The lady in the picture on the right, is pumping water.



A subject for much talk has been the **delayed suitcases**. How did we cope? Well, we checked the cases in with Aer Lingus at Belfast International on the Sunday morning expecting see them again in Entebbe. To be fair to BA, who flew us from London to Entebbe, the time between landing and leaving Heathrow only allowed for a very quick bacon sarnie. Despite pre-booking our seats on-line we managed to end up in the second row from the back of the fairly substantial plane which took us to Entebbe, a flight of more than eight hours. Was I wise opting for *The last King of Scotland* as my in-flight movie? By the time we had disembarked in Entebbe, using only the front door, and paid \$50 each for our visas, we were literally the last into the baggage reclaim area.

You know that feeling when, for at least 30 seconds, no-one speaks, watching the near empty carousel go round and round in the near empty baggage hall. And not a sign of my fluorescent pink bag. Then one of us, can’t remember who, remarks quietly that our bags

don't seem to be here, then an hour later we are leaving the airport – bagless – having filled in various forms and at least ascertained that the bags were still in London. (NB – if travelling somewhere like Sudan, it is advisable to pack anti-malaria tablets in hand luggage).

Now a team of four from Down and Dromore Diocese also flew from Belfast to Entebbe with us, via Heathrow, and their bags arrived safely. This is why we suspect that the large circular saw and length of copper cable in Archdeacon Forde's suitcase, destined for Yei VTC, and the tractor filters (one in my bag, one in David's bag) may have caused some consternation during the security check at Heathrow. Maybe, we think, we should have put all the mechanical bits in one bag. Hindsight is a great thing.

A big thank you to Dean Stephen Lowry from Dromore Cathedral, who waited for us at Entebbe Airport and ensured the rest of his team sent the taxi back for us. And to June, the only other lady member of the Northern Ireland group, who loaned me a teeshirt to sleep in and some washing powder. Sadly June never saw her white teeshirt again. It turned orange and stayed that way, despite washing. I would have been embarrassed to return it. The dust of Yei gets into everything, but that's another story...



So the next morning found us back at the airport, with the poor archdeacon (pictured with David planning the bag rescue) running from this office to that to arrange for our bags to be collected from arrivals when they reached Entebbe on the next BA flight on Tuesday evening (by which time we would be in Yei). The staff of Eagle Air would collect them and would then put them on the Eagle Air flight to Yei on the Thursday morning.

By that Monday afternoon we knew we had at three days to manage without our carefully packed luggage. We bought some toiletries, washing powder and undies in a supermarket, and at the market I picked up a fetching banana yellow skirt and brown teeshirt, which did not match and was rather small, but the choice was limited to say the least. When we were out we saw this rather interesting scaffolding (right).



And so we managed until Thursday. I had to do without contact lenses (my vanity did suffer) and the gents had to do without shaving. On Thursday morning Archdeacon Forde went to collect the suitcases at the airstrip but alas, they were not on the plane! The Norwegian mine clearing company's new computers had take precedence (well obviously) and there was no room for our bags. And the next flight was not until Saturday.



The lip wobbled a little, but what can you do? (More washing! More banana skirt!) My biggest concern was that my chargers for the camera, video camera, and spare disks were in the suitcases. Fortunately, I had two fully charged batteries which I eked out until Saturday, and I saved taking any video until Mongo School on the Friday. I did manage to take a photo (left) of the two scruffs who were representing Connor Diocese with me.



On Saturday morning the banana skirt made its last outing to Yei airstrip (pictured left). We stood in the sun and watched the plane touch down, scattering the goats from the runway. Then – from inside the nose of the plane (right) - emerged our bags.



And you know what – we had far more stuff than we needed. But it was great to get my lenses, and my conditioner. Oh yes, and the chargers!!



So where did we stay? In Entebbe we were in a lovely guesthouse (left and below) not far from the airport - beautiful gardens, lovely food (cooked on a barbecue and served outdoors with lanterns at every table), comfortable ensuite rooms. Very quiet, apart from the most amazing dawn chorus, and only a short walk to the market

area. We returned to the guest house on our last day, as we arrived in Entebbe before lunch and were not flying out until after midnight. To pass the time the Connor trio walked (or in David Cromie's case, speed-walked) to a lovely park on the shores of Lake Victoria which looked so inviting on such a hot day after a dusty walk that we had to go in for a paddle to cool off (as demonstrated by David, below left) and wasn't it just a lovely way to end the trip...



Lovely, that is, until we heard about the Lake Victoria worm. The one that can get into your skin, but you won't know about it for the next 10 years. That's when it matures and causes all sorts of horrendous symptoms, including liver failure. Fortunately it is treatable, and we all have to be tested after three months to ensure we are not infected. The lesson is – **DO NOT STICK SO MUCH AS A BIG TOE IN LAKE VICTORIA, NO MATTER HOW INVITING!**

I digress. In Yei we stayed in the ECS Guest House, which is run by the Diocese. Our rooms were built for a Bishops' Conference at the end of last year. Archdeacon Forde was in the room previously occupied by George Carey. Our beds had mosquito nets, and we each had a bathroom with flush toilet and a cold shower which both worked when the water pump was switched on (sometimes it wasn't). Yei has very reliable electricity which is on from 7am until midnight. Really can't complain, but getting up at 6.30am to find there was no light and no running water on the morning of Sunday worship was a bit of a challenge.



The doors were made of cast iron and padlocked. It was a bit of an odd arrangement, and opening and locking led to a few bruised arms, but very good for security! Archdeacon Forde demonstrates, left.

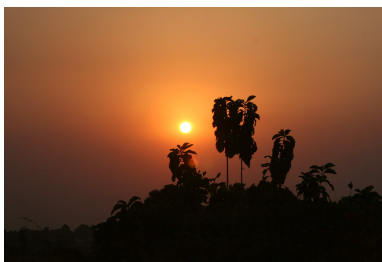
A new block of rooms (we nicknamed it the Hilton suite) was just being finished while we were there. These were particularly nice as they had tiled rather than concrete floors! There are other more basic rooms and some dormitory accommodation in the ECS, and many of these beds were booked by the UN.



We ate most of our meals in the restaurant at the guesthouse. **The food** would be sitting waiting in pots for us on our table. Our first meal was particularly sumptuous as we were joined by Bishop Hilary, Canon John Kanyikwa of the VTC, and John and Poppy Spens. Chicken, spiced vegetables, rice, chapatti, salad, water and even bottles of Coke or cartons of grape juice. On other days there might have just been one dish, normally chicken in sauce. We tried not to think about what happened to the roosters in the freezer every night when the power went off! The food was highly flavoured and plentiful, although we had to avoid the salads because they would have been washed in local water, which was a shame as they looked delicious!

We drank only bottled water. The local bottle water is called Divine – apparently when it was first launched they called in Yei River Water but no-one bought it. Having seen the murky water in Yei's rivers I'm not surprised!

On our last evening we ate out in a restaurant with John and Poppy Spens, and their assistant Wendy Parker. The food was good, though the choice was limited to beef or chicken. And there were chips too – something we had not seen since leaving home! It made a change to rice.



So what about the weather? Well, it was hot, in the high thirties, but there was sometimes a cooling breeze and it rained during the night on a couple of occasions. The sun shone most of the time, (pictured setting, left) but there was not a lot of opportunity for sunbathing. A swimming pool between our rooms and the Hilton would certainly boost tourism, but I don't think sunbathing in a swimsuit or bikini would be a good idea. In Yei, the women all wear skirts and teeshirts or blouses which cover their shoulders, and despite the heat the men do not wear shorts. I saw only two local women in trousers, and apparently until recently they could actually be arrested for daring to wear trousers.

Staying in touch with home was easy. We had not expected mobile phone reception once we left Uganda. It meant we could ring or text home very day. I'll not mention the bill!



Southern Sudan was **jaw droppingly amazing** in every way. It was just so African. The people were poor, the sides of the roads in the town were lined with shacks that could have been homes, shops or bars. Most people lived in straw roofed tukuls, (like



these, left) which they kept incredibly clean and tidy. Large family groups shared a group of tukuls, there was a kitchen tukul, like the one on the right, a bedroom tukul etc. Outside the children, and there were many, many children, played contentedly in the dust, while older children spent hours pumping water from the boreholes. As I said before, the women carried sometimes enormous loads on their heads, and babies on their backs. Their clothes were always colourful and they sported a wonderful array of plaited hairstyles.



All around there was green grass, very red dust, wonderful mango trees which will be even more impressive when the mango buds we saw develop into full fruits. There were small geckos and large geckos (left), a few spiders, mosquitoes, but otherwise very little to cause annoyance. And above it all a blue sky.

The remnants of the civil war are still there. Derelict buildings with walls splattered with bullet holes (right), stern looking SPA soldiers, UN jeeps, posters promoting different aspects of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement and the forthcoming elections, and many signs of poverty.



Despite all this we received a wonderful welcome. We worked hard, talking to various people, listening, writing, taking photos, juggling camcorder and camera, but I also had fun. Mulling over the events of the day under the stars outside my room on a balmy evening with an archdeacon, an accountant and anyone else who happens to be in the vicinity has a lot to be said for it.

And that is what it was really like!